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# The Tiwi of Melville Island, the Portuguese of Timor, and Slavery

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## Abstract

For over 180 years, it has been reported in academic and popular literature that Portuguese raiders from Timor captured and enslaved people from the Tiwi Islands in north Australia. The experience of slave-raiding is often cited as an explanation for the islanders' fierce hostility to intruders. However, this is despite the lack of any solid evidence to support the slave-raiding claims. Additionally, if Portuguese slave-raiding of the Tiwi Islands began in the sixteenth century or at the very beginning of the seventeenth century, as is often claimed, or implied, then the generally accepted history of the European discovery of Australia is wrong. The origins of these claims, their validity, and alternative readings of the Tiwi Islands' history are all explored in this article.

## Keywords

Portuguese – slavery – Timor – Tiwi Islands

The first authenticated European sighting and landfall on Australian soil was made at Cape York Peninsula by Dutchman Willem Janszoon in 1606. In 1636, two Dutch ships sailed along the shores of Melville Island off Australia's north coast. Not realizing he was facing an island, commander Pieter Pieterszoon named his discovery Van Diemenslant, after Anthony Van Diemen, Governor-General of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC, United East India Company). Traces of this are still evident in the name Cape Van Diemen. In 1705, three Dutch ships, led by Maarten van Delft, explored the north Australian coast for three months, spending most of that time on Melville Island fraternizing with the local Aboriginal people, the Tiwi. Melville Island and neighbouring

Bathurst Island are known today collectively as the Tiwi Islands. Meanwhile, for over 180 years, it has been reported in academic and popular literature that Portuguese raiders from Timor captured and enslaved people from the Tiwi Islands. The experience of slave-raiding is often cited as an explanation for the reputation gained by the islanders as being fiercely hostile to intruders up to the early twentieth century. However, this is despite the lack of any solid evidence to support the slave-raiding claims. Additionally, if Portuguese slave-raiding of the Tiwi Islands began in the sixteenth century or the very beginning of the seventeenth century, as often claimed, or implied, then the generally accepted history of the European discovery of Australia is wrong. The origins of these claims, their validity, and alternative readings of Tiwi Islands history, including possible early non-European contact, are all explored in this article. The latter issue is important, highlighting as it does the little-explored evidence for early Asian or Papuan contact with the Aborigines of north Australia. First, however, the article will examine the sources that have perpetuated the notion of Portuguese slave-raiding.

## 1 Sources That Make Claims for Portuguese Slave-Raiding

Following the Dutch in 1705, no known European visits to the islands occurred until the arrival of the *Mermaid*, commanded by Captain Phillip Parker King of the Royal Navy, in 1818. King and some of his men went ashore at Melville Island to take bearings from Luxmore Head. They retreated to their boat when confronted by spear-bearing Tiwi men, who took control of the theodolite stand that had been left behind. King negotiated for the stand's return, but while some items were exchanged, the stand remained with the Tiwi. King and his men stayed in their boat, but a Tiwi woman, repeating the words *ven aca*, appeared by her motions to be inviting King's men to land. Armed Tiwi men were observed nearby, and King, deciding the Tiwi were untrustworthy, abandoned the stand and returned to his ship. No further contact was made with the Tiwi before King sailed away a few days later (King 1969 [1827]:109–123). King's record of the phrase *ven aca* used by the Tiwi woman in his journal, published in 1827, was vital for the construction of the slave-raiding theory, as will be discussed below.

The earliest published speculation about the Tiwi Islands being subject to slave-raiding comes from John Campbell, who from September 1826 was commandant of Fort Dundas (established 1824, abandoned 1829), the first British settlement in north Australia, located on Melville Island. Campbell says that he once tried to approach a Tiwi man, who kept his distance. The man held

his wrists together, 'and appeared as if struggling to escape from the grasp of an enemy'. He then pointed to his neck, looked up at the branches of a tree and 'shook his head significantly', which Campbell took to be an 'allusion to being hung'. Campbell (1834:155) interprets all this to mean the islanders had experienced visits by strangers who forced them away as slaves. Why slavers would hang their captives is unexplained and Campbell's reasoning is otherwise unsatisfactory, but he was inclined to this view due to other circumstances. One of these was his claim that the Makassar-based trepang fishers, who worked the coastal waters of northern Australia (now known as Macassans), were forbidden to go near Melville Island,<sup>1</sup> which they called 'Amba', alleging it was 'infested by pirates'. For Campbell (1834:155), this means slavers, a view reinforced by the fact that *amba* (*hamba*) means 'slave' in Malay. However, one wonders why the Macassans would use a Malay word rather than the Makassarese equivalent, *ata*.

Furthermore, in an 1828 report, Campbell reveals that he learnt about the Macassans from Captain Henry Smyth, commandant of Fort Wellington at Raffles Bay, which had been established in 1827 as a replacement for Fort Dundas. Smyth did not report the Macassan name for Melville Island to be 'Amba' but rather 'Aimba Mootiara' (J. Campbell 1923:713; Smyth 1923:790). The meaning of *aimba* is unclear, but Campbell Macknight suggests it is a misspelling of *lamba*.<sup>2</sup> If so, the name translates as 'Pearl Bay'. However, Macknight (1969:114) notes that this was the Macassan name for Port Essington, so multiple errors may have been made. Otherwise, the name would be appropriate for some place on Melville Island, as rich pearl-shell beds were (re)discovered near the island in the late nineteenth century by pearlery operating out of Palmerston (established 1869, renamed Darwin 1911), the capital of South Australia's Northern Territory (Lamb 2015:22–25).

Another reason Campbell gives for his belief in slave-raiding was a 'lad' with Malay features and skin-colouring, who had been 'taken from a native tribe in 1825, and detained at Fort Dundas three or four days, before escaping'. Campbell (1834:155) concludes that it was 'probable that he was taken when a child from some Malay slave-ship, or fishing prôa [boat], and reared among the Melville Islanders'. But why a slave ship? If the Tiwi were fearful of slavers, how did they free this boy from the slavers? The fishing-boat theory is doubtful for similar reasons. Perhaps the boy was a shipwreck survivor, but he could also have been the son of a local Aboriginal woman and a Macassan, as was common

1 Although much has been written since, the authoritative work on the Macassans remains Macknight 1976.

2 Personal communication, 11-2-2021.

elsewhere along the Northern Territory coast. Even though no Macassans ever came to Fort Dundas, physical evidence of their presence on the island has been found. Tiwi oral tradition also mentions their visits. This will be discussed further below. It is ironic that Campbell presents the story of this 'lad', captured and held by the British against his will, as proof that some prior visitors had been slavers.

Campbell's final reason for believing in slave-raiders is King's account from 1818 of the woman who cried out *ven aca*. King makes no comment on the meaning of these words and neither does Campbell (1834:155–156), but he identifies them as Portuguese, which induced him to believe that vessels from Dili in Timor may have visited Melville Island 'for the purpose of seizing the natives and carrying them away as slaves'. This idea was adopted by George Windsor Earl, who from 1838 to 1844 worked as a linguist and draughtsman at Port Essington (established 1838, abandoned 1849), the last British settlement attempted on the Northern Territory coast. During his time at Port Essington, Earl visited many of the neighbouring islands as well as Kupang (a major settlement in Dutch Timor) and Dili (a major settlement in Portuguese Timor) (Reece 2002:7, 2008:160–161).

In a book published in 1853, Earl devotes a chapter to Melville Island, a place he never visited. Citing John Campbell, Earl (1853:204) reveals that *ven aca* means 'come here' in Portuguese—but were these the words King heard? It is more likely that the woman spoke in Tiwi and said something like *mana* (an expression with various meanings including 'go ahead' and 'move on') or *maka* ('where?').<sup>3</sup> It is also possible that the woman's gestures, which King interpreted as an invitation to come ashore, may have meant the opposite and she was indicating he should go away. Such confusion over culture-specific gestures and signs is a common phenomenon. Regardless of what really happened at Melville Island in 1818, Earl (1853:210) concludes:

It is to be feared that Major Campbell was correct in his surmises as to Melville Island having once been the resort of slave-ships; for according to the testimony of the older inhabitants of Timor, Melville Island was only less a source of slavery than New Guinea, in proportion to its smaller extent of surface, at the period in which the slave-trade was encouraged or connived at by the European authorities in the Archipelago.

3 Thanks to Eric Venbrux for these suggestions. See also Jenny Lee (2013), *Tiwi-English interactive dictionary*. <http://ausil.org/Dictionary/Tiwi/lexicon/main.htm> (accessed 2-12-2020).

Earl does not reveal the identity of his respondents on Timor, or why they should be believed, yet these words have proven to be the basis of nearly all later claims for Portuguese slave raids on Melville Island, as most authors cite him, either directly or indirectly. Over 20 sources have been identified that mention the slave-raiding claims, dating from 1960 to 2018, and there are, no doubt, more.<sup>4</sup> Some authors repeat the claims without comment, and some caution that they are not entirely convincing, but few are openly critical. Some examples of the claims are as follows:

Tiwi distrust of foreigners probably stemmed from these decades [in the eighteenth century] when the Portuguese on Timor were raiding Melville Island for slaves

HART and PILLING 1960:97–98

There is some evidence that the Portuguese raided Bathurst and Melville islands for slaves in the seventeenth century

POWELL 1982:52

It is probable that the Portuguese obtained slaves from the [Tiwi] islands in the eighteenth century

STANLEY 1983:1

It is believed that from 1600 to 1800 the Portuguese from Timor raided Melville Island and took the young Tiwi tribesmen as slaves

JAMES 1989:15–16

the Tiwi had been the victims of slaving activities by the Portuguese operating out of Timor until at least the beginning of the nineteenth century

CAMERON 1998:32

Circumstantial evidence suggests Portuguese slavers may have been the first European visitors [to the Tiwi Islands]

FREDERICKSEN 2002:291

4 In chronological order the sources are: Hart and Pilling 1960; Mulvaney 1969; Krastins 1972; Pye 1977; McIntyre 1977; Powell 1982; Stanley 1983; Harris 1986; James 1989; Venbrux 1995; Poignant 1996; Cameron 1998; Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999; Morris 2001; Fredericksen 2002; Powell 2010; Isaacs 2012; G. Campbell 2013; Powell 2016; Pugh 2017; Wells 2018.

the possibility [exists] of slave raiding [of the Tiwi Islands] from Timor during the long occupation of that island by the Portuguese

POWELL 2016:58

the Portuguese [...] had occupied Timor and raided the Tiwi Islands to capture slaves

WELLS 2018:52

This sample shows there is no consensus about when this slave-raiding took place. It is also clear that some authors have a mistaken notion of Portuguese activities in Timor, as it is sometimes implied that the Portuguese occupied all of Timor from an early date. In one exaggerated case it is falsely claimed that ‘as early as 1511 Portugal annexed Timor’ (Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999:421–422).<sup>5</sup> This is not the place to go into a detailed history of Timor, but suffice it to say that a permanent Portuguese presence in the region only began when Dominican missionaries were established on Solor Island in the 1560s, and representatives of the Portuguese crown did not begin to reside on Timor itself until the 1650s. The Portuguese then maintained only a tentative presence on Timor until well into the eighteenth century and never had control of the whole island.<sup>6</sup>

The slave-raiding claims appear to be confined to English-language literature and receive no mention in the Portuguese-language histories of Timor consulted for this study.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, it is notable that few authors make any reference to a Tiwi tradition concerning the purported Portuguese slave-raiding. The anthropologists C.W.M. Hart and Arnold. R. Pilling are well-acquainted with the Tiwi, the former having carried out research on the islands in 1928–1929 and the latter in 1953–1954. They make several suppositions about the effects of Portuguese slave-raiding on Tiwi culture and society, but none of this is informed

5 The Mulvaney and Kamminga book is a major rewriting of Mulvaney’s book of the same name that appeared 30 years earlier. In the earlier version (p. 36), Mulvaney presents a largely uncritical account of Portuguese slave-raiding. Thirty years later, he and Kamminga are more sceptical and characterize the slave-raiding claims as ‘at least an exaggeration’. Unfortunately, they also add the false claim for a 1511 Portuguese annexation of Timor.

6 For more on the colonial history of Timor, see Gunn 1999 and Hägerdal 2012.

7 Agência Geral do Ultramar 1970; A. de Castro 1867; G. de Castro 1944; Duarte 1928, 1943; Felgas 1956; Leitão 1948, 1952; Martinho 1943; Matos 1974; Morais 1934, 1944; Oliveira 1949. In addition, significant scholars working in the field were contacted and each replied that they were unaware of any sources that support the slave-raiding claims: Fernando Augusto de Figueiredo, personal communication, 6-5-2021; Hans Hägerdal, personal communication, 27-5-2019; Ricardo Roque, personal communication, 5-5-2021.

by the Tiwi themselves who, Hart and Pilling (1960:99–110) say, ‘remember nothing about it’. Meanwhile, John Morris (2001:3, 31), who describes himself as an ethnohistorian, worked on the islands in the 1960s and 1970s before beginning formal research there in the 1990s. Morris says ‘Tiwi oral history today offers no insight into the earliest visitors to their shores’, that is, no slave-raiding stories. The anthropologist Eric Venbrux is also well-acquainted with the Tiwi, having conducted research on the islands in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. He says that the Tiwi people he spoke to have no stories about Europeans before the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The only example discovered of an author claiming that the Tiwi do consider Portuguese slave-raiding to be part of their history comes from ethnomusicologist Genevieve Campbell (2013:7), who makes the following statement:

Although not well documented in the literature, Tiwi oral history recounts that at least a generation prior to the five-year British settlement at Fort Dundas on Melville Island from 1824, the Portuguese had already been taking Tiwi men from Melville Island as slaves.

In correspondence, Campbell explained that in 2010, Tiwi elders told her that Tiwi men and some women were ‘taken’ to work with ‘Macassans’ on ‘Portuguese’ ships. Some of these people returned and some did not. Campbell raised the matter with Tiwi elders again in late 2020 and received similar answers. Campbell admits the stories are unclear on who ‘took’ the Tiwi or how this was done.<sup>9</sup> Macassan boat owners and outfitters could be Chinese, Malay, or Dutch as well as Makassarese (Macknight 1976:19). Possibly, Tiwi people learnt that they and their Macassan shipmates were working for non-Macassan owners who were designated ‘Portuguese’, or at least this is the term used today. Macassans are more likely to have used *Balanda*, which literally means Dutchmen but can refer to all Europeans (Macknight 1972:296). Furthermore, the fact that some of the Tiwi returned after being ‘taken’ negates the notion of complete enslavement. The stories told to Campbell are intriguing but also ambiguous and, for this author, fall short of being an oral tradition of Portuguese slave-raiding. Nevertheless, while it is difficult to know exactly what the stories told to Campbell do represent, they show that there is an oral tradition of Tiwi people being ‘taken’. However, it is possible that this is quite a recent tradition resulting from a mid-1990s presentation to the Tiwi Land

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication, 1-10-2020.

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication, 17-11-2020, 14-2-2021, 15-2-2021.



Council on a 1602 Portuguese map (Tiwi Land Council 1996:6).<sup>10</sup> The presenter, Noel Peters (2013), later published a complex paper in which he attempted to prove by cartographic means that the map portrays the Tiwi Islands, but on the day, it is likely he gave a more general talk and may have introduced the topic of slave-raiding. In this regard, it is worth noting that Venbrux qualified his claim that the Tiwi had no stories about Europeans before the nineteenth century by stating that the 1705 encounter with the Dutch has since 're-entered' the oral tradition following a re-enactment of the Dutch landing on the islands in 1995.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, Ernestine Hill wrote several articles and a complete book about the Northern Territory. No mention of Portuguese slave-raiding was discovered in any of her works, but in one article she implies that the Tiwi acknowledged the visits of Europeans before the Dutch through the costumes and decorations worn in *pukumani* mortuary rituals. According to Hill (1944:9), the following scene was witnessed by buffalo shooter Joe Cooper on Melville Island in 1895:

Next day three men came down the beach wearing the amazing regalia of *pukamiani* [sic], which lends colour to the legendary landing there of Magellan's Spaniards long ago. Hair teased out and thickly powdered with white ochre, like a wig, big decorative ruffs of white cockatoo feathers, bamboo bangles and pendant puffs of dingo-fluff on a hair-string round their necks, their hands painted white to simulate gloves, carrying lances and stepping with elastic grace, they looked exactly like courtiers of Velasquez's day, except that the only other article of wear was a puzzled frown.

As Morris (1999:117) says, Hill's suggestion that the Tiwi mimicked ancient Spaniards is 'highly imaginative', but with no basis in fact. The last remaining ship of Magellan's fleet reached Timor in 1522, but there is no record of a visit to the Australian mainland or the Tiwi Islands. Even if it had occurred, it is unlikely any of the men would have worn wigs, which only became a popular fashion item in the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, the costumes and body decorations used during *pukumani* ceremonies are designed to disguise dancers from the spirits of the dead, and the 'lances' described by Hill are probably the stylized spears only used in such ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> However, as Morris (1999:117) notes,

10 John Hicks, long-term secretary of the Tiwi Land Council, was later lead author of a paper in which it was claimed the Portuguese may have visited the Tiwi Islands in the seventeenth century (Hicks et al. 2012:762).

11 Personal communication, 1-10-2020. For more, see Venbrux 2015.

12 Bennett 1993; 'Culture', Tiwi College website, <https://www.tiwicollege.com/culture.php>

Hill was a popular author and her explanation for the distinctive attire worn in *pukumani* ceremonies was probably accepted by many of her readers. It is possible Hill's tale was later altered to suit Portuguese slave-raiders, as the author has heard it said that the Tiwi have dances where they wear wigs and costumes like old-time Portuguese mariners. The ultimate source of this story has not been traced.<sup>13</sup>

## 2 A Secret Portuguese Discovery of Australia?

The documented visit to Cape York Peninsula by Janszoon in 1606 has resulted in the Dutch being almost universally acknowledged as the earliest European discoverers of Australia. However, if the Portuguese had been visiting the Tiwi Islands since 1600, or earlier, as stated or implied by authors writing about the slave-raiding claims, this is obviously wrong. Yet this challenge to the orthodox history is rarely acknowledged as such by those same authors. Elsewhere, however, supporters of an argument for a Portuguese discovery of Australia in the 1500s have been active since the eighteenth century. Adherents of this theory often claim that as the Portuguese were present on Timor since the sixteenth century, it is reasonable to believe that they would have discovered nearby Australia either on purpose or by accident. The problem is that no documentary evidence for a Portuguese discovery has ever been revealed. This is explained by the fact that the Portuguese were notoriously secretive about their operations in the eastern islands. And even if any reports of secret discoveries in Australia were made, they are likely to have been destroyed during the great Lisbon earthquake and fire of 1755 (Urban 2009:42).

The main 'evidence' offered by Portuguese-discovery theorists are some scattered artefacts found on Australian shores and a series of maps created in Dieppe, France, in the sixteenth century. Some of these maps depict a large land mass with many Portuguese place names labelled 'Java La Grande', which some authors claim shows a striking resemblance to parts of the Australian coastline. It is assumed the maps were constructed based on Portuguese sources and

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(accessed 8-2-2021); 'Dance and ceremonies', Tiwi Land Council website, <https://tiwilan.dncouncil.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&p=249&l=2&id=60&smid=121> (accessed 5-2-2021).

13 While I was presenting an earlier version of this article, an audience member said that when on Melville Island more than 20 years ago, they had heard of these costumes and decorations representing Portuguese slavers. Later requests to find out who told them this went unanswered.

are proof that the Portuguese visited Australia before other Europeans. Alexander Dalrymple (1786:4; see also *Australian dictionary* 1966) is generally credited with making the first reference to the Dieppe maps as proof of a Portuguese discovery of Australia in a pamphlet published in 1786. R.H. Major then published a book and a short article in 1859 and 1861, respectively, that championed the notion of a Portuguese discovery. The major proponent of the theory in Australia was artist and self-taught historian George Collingridge, whose 1895 book, *The discovery of Australia*, remained the preeminent work on the subject until the appearance of Kenneth McIntyre's *The secret discovery of Australia* in 1977 (Cowley 1988:15).<sup>14</sup>

Collingridge's book was controversial. O.H.K. Spate (1981) argues that Collingridge's enthusiasm for a Portuguese priority led him to make too many contentious claims, which only reinforced the general lack of acceptance of his theories. Collingridge's credibility as a historian was delivered a lethal blow with a public lecture, later published, by Professor G. Arnold Wood (1918), in which he attacked Collingridge's arguments one-by-one and found them all unconvincing. In the same lecture, Wood also refuted the claims made by Major. This did not stop speculation about a Portuguese priority, as proven by the following claim published in 1927:

The northern coast of the continent must have been known to the Portuguese and Dutch navigators for centuries before any effort was made to explore and exploit that vast area of rich territory which it fringed. There is evidence that Melville Island and other features of the coast were used as landmarks by sailors making for Timor from Europe.

COOK 1927:27

This account is interesting from a Northern Territory perspective, as it appears in a book written by Dr Cecil Cook, who in the year of the book's publication became the Territory's chief medical officer. Unfortunately, he provides no sources for his claims.

McIntyre, meanwhile, enjoyed far greater acceptance for his theories than Collingridge, with his book selling enough copies for a revised edition to be published in 1982. Despite this public acclaim, McIntyre's arguments for a Portuguese priority gained little support in the academic community. Several scholars made objections to McIntyre's conclusions, categorizing them as unjustified and based on dubious arguments. As well as maps and fragments

14 Collingridge 1895; Major 1859, 1861; McIntyre 1977.

of Portuguese reports, McIntyre relied on Australian evidence, such as a set of keys discovered at Geelong in 1847, the ruins of a stone building at Bittangabee Bay, and a wooden boat located somewhere in the sand dunes at Warrnambool, but unsighted since 1890. Most historians have rejected this 'evidence' (Duncan 1997:64–78).<sup>15</sup>

Other authors have revived the Portuguese discovery theory since McIntyre, but no conclusive evidence has been forthcoming. The most interesting of these more recent works for the purposes of this article is an article by Frank Urban that is solely concerned with answering the question 'Did the Portuguese know of Australia's Tiwi Islands prior to 1606?' Urban's starting point is a 1594 Dutch map based on materials compiled by Jan Huygen van Linschoten. The map shows several Indonesian islands roughly in their correct positions, including Timor, Aru, Tanimbar, and others. It also shows twin islands located east-southeast of Timor, named Guaon, close to the real location of the Tiwi Islands. Additionally, the map shows the strait separating the islands in the same northwest to southeast orientation as the Apsley Strait that separates Bathurst and Melville Islands. Van Linschoten also shows the islands of Guaon in the map of Southeast Asia that appeared in his *Itinerario* published in 1596. Van Linschoten was Dutch and spent over five years in Portuguese employment in Goa. During that time, he gained access to secret information about shipping routes and other matters that he used to construct his map and write his famous book that provided Dutch mariners with hitherto unavailable information (Urban 2009:42–46).

Urban includes much additional material to support his contention that the Portuguese had discovered the Tiwi Islands well before the Dutch first saw them. He makes an impressive case, but it is still conjecture and not solid evidence of a Portuguese priority. One reason he gives for the Portuguese not establishing a base on the Tiwi Islands is the islanders' reputation for murdering strangers who intrude on their shores. The reference Urban (2009:54) uses for this information is a statement by Hart and Pilling. This is odd, as Hart and Pilling surmise the islanders' hostility to intruders was based on their experiences of Portuguese slave-raiding. In fact, of all the Portuguese-discovery theorists mentioned so far, only McIntyre (1977:84–85) mentions Tiwi Islands slave-raiding, but his claim about the reported use of the words *ven aca* is unconvincing:

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15 The contemporary style and good condition of the Geelong keys when they were found suggest they had only recently been lost, whereas the building technique, style, and location of the Bittangabee Bay ruins suggest they were built in the 1840s by nearby landholders; see Johns 2014:254–75; Pearson 1978:13–5.

in an island subject to raids from the slavers, no words would be more remembered, no words would be more ominous or more dreaded than those two words, *Venha-ca!* Come here!

Would slave-raiders expect their victims to obey such a command? It seems unlikely.

### 3 Were the Portuguese Slave-Raiders?

An outstanding feature of the slave-raiding claims is that every author who has repeated them has accepted without question that the Portuguese of Timor were slave-raiders—but were they? The literature suggests that the Portuguese in Africa and Asia mainly purchased slaves from local traders, but they did resort to taking captives themselves on occasion. In all cases, however, it seems that where Portuguese slave-raiding occurred, it was eventually replaced with purchase through intermediaries. Joseph Miller (2003:178–179) says the Portuguese explorers of the West African coast in the early fifteenth century purchased slaves for sale in Portugal and Spain. After Portuguese settlement of Madeira in the 1420s and the establishment of sugar plantations, enslaved African labour was bought on the mainland. However, in his chronicle about Guinea (completed in 1453), Gomes Eannes de Azurara gives multiple examples of Africans captured and enslaved directly by the Portuguese during the 1440s. According to De Azurara (1963:xx), over 900 such slaves were brought to Portugal during those years. In an account covering the same region from the early seventeenth century, Father Baltasar Barreira declares that Portuguese slave-traders from the Cape Verde Islands obtained slaves from the mainland through resident Portuguese merchants who bought them from African rulers in the interior. Some of the slaves offered for sale were captives of war, debt slaves, or convicted criminals, but the Portuguese were aware that many of them had probably been enslaved specifically for sale (Hair 1998:118–127). However, slave purchase, not capture, appears to have remained the standard in this region from then on.

In West Central Africa, the Portuguese purchased slaves from the kingdom of Kongo from the early sixteenth century onwards (Heywood 2009:1–22). Following the establishment of Luanda in the 1570s, the Portuguese became directly involved in slave-raiding and the colony of Angola became a major source for the slave trade. By the 1700s, however, slaves were mostly obtained through agents from local chiefs (Warner 1991:5–15). On the East African coast, slave-trading from Mozambique reached its peak in the early 1800s, but it had

been on the rise since the mid eighteenth century. Slaves were mainly sold to Brazilian and Portuguese slavers, as well as French slavers from the Mascarene Islands. The cloth used to buy the slaves and other goods was supplied by Gujarati traders from Diu, who later became directly involved in the trade. The cloth was traded in the interior by African merchants to purchase the desired merchandise, which was brought back to the coast and to Mozambique Island (Machado 2003:17–19).

According to Charles Boxer (1968:223, 235, 240), the Portuguese in sixteenth-century Macau purchased children kidnapped by Chinese agents or sold by their parents. These children were then retained as domestic labour or exported as slaves. This practice was forbidden by the Portuguese crown in 1571 but was only effectively ended in 1758 with an edict that decreed the immediate freedom of all Chinese slaves. Meanwhile, Heather Sutherland (1983:266) declares that from 1623 until the late 1660s most of the slaves acquired by the Dutch VOC were Bengalis 'bought from the *feringhi* (Portuguese and mestizo raiders) of the Arakan coast'. This claim is supported by D.G.E. Hall (1977:246, 392–394), who says the *feringhi* were not official representatives of the Portuguese crown but rather 'mercenaries and adventurers' who operated in concert with the Arakanese.<sup>16</sup> Other non-official Portuguese 'private traders, adventurers and smugglers' established a settlement in Bengal at Hugli in the sixteenth century. Although Hugli had been approved by an earlier Mughal ruler, Emperor Shah Jahan sent an army to eject the Portuguese in 1632. There are several reasons mentioned in local and Portuguese accounts for the siege of the town, but one of them was the burgeoning Portuguese slave trade and Portuguese slave-raiding, including the recent capture of some local Mughal women (Chakraborty 2019:708; Dutta 2019). Percival Spear (1973:63) blames the 'disorder and piracy' at Hugli on 'Luso-Indians' from Goa.

In the Timor region, slavery existed well before the arrival of the Portuguese and their arch-rivals, the Dutch. The Portuguese first learnt about the trade possibilities with Timor after they conquered Malacca in 1511. According to early accounts, ships from Java and Malacca visited Timor to trade for three main products: sandalwood, beeswax, and slaves. Most of the slaves from Timor had been enslaved as a result of the frequent warfare on the island between the numerous petty princedoms. Headhunting raids played a ritual role in Timor and most of the captured enemies were killed. Attractive young women, and young boys and girls, were more likely to survive and were enslaved to work on household tasks. Some people were also enslaved due to their failure to

16 See also Dijk 2008.

pay fines or as punishment for certain crimes. Any of these people were also likely to be sold. As the Portuguese and Dutch formed alliances with the different princedoms in Timor and its surrounding islands, they came into the possession of slaves through the local warfare in which they participated. Slaves were also obtained during campaigns to enforce European suzerainty. The Portuguese are said to have acquired many slaves in Timor this way during the 1660s and 1670s. In addition, Timorese and other allies also presented the Europeans with slaves as part of a tribute system. Nevertheless, the main way the Europeans obtained slaves in Timor was by purchasing them (Hägerdal 2010:25, 27, 2020a:15–33). Slaves for the Batavia (Jakarta) and Macau markets were also acquired from the Topasses, a Eurasian and local Christian group based on Timor and nearby Flores. The Topasses conducted slave raids in the region, but were also subject to much in-fighting, resulting in a steady supply of slaves for sale (Boxer 1968:189).<sup>17</sup> Slaves could also be purchased from other places, for example, Makassar on the island of Sulawesi, which Sutherland (1983:266) says ‘was a major source of slaves and trans-shipment point for slaves through the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’. It also provided a base for Portuguese traders in the early seventeenth century.

As the arguments supporting the notion of Portuguese slave-raiding of the Tiwi Islands can all be traced back to King’s record of a Tiwi woman using the words *ven aca*, it is notable that linguist John W. Harris contends that there is no ‘conclusive evidence of any meaningful linguistic contact’ between the Tiwi and the Portuguese. Any Portuguese words that the Tiwi did possess, he says, could have been gained through ‘the “Portuguese-Malay” trade pidgin of the archipelago’. Nevertheless, Harris repeats many of the old arguments for Portuguese slave-raiding, citing Earl, Campbell, McIntyre, and others. He makes his own contribution by referring to an 1826 report about a vessel from Melville Island that visited Timor. Harris says it was learnt during the visit that a ‘regular export of slaves took place from the Portuguese settlement at Dili’ and that ‘[a] French vessel had just taken a full load of slaves’. Furthermore, an English ship that was flying Dutch colours ‘because of its disreputable business’ had also made a visit. Harris (1986:116–117) then observes:

Given the clandestine nature of these activities, it is hardly surprising that references to Portuguese slave trading in North Australia are scant.

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17 For more on the Topasses, see Andaya 2010.

Harris's commentary is hard to understand. There is no suggestion that the Portuguese were involved in slave-raiding in north Australia in the nineteenth century and it is unclear what the connection is with the other examples, except to show Portuguese involvement in the slave trade. The Portuguese had no need to be secretive about this, as slave-trading remained legal in Portuguese colonies at this time. Slavery had, however, been abolished by France and Britain, so it was the subjects of those nations who were behaving illegally. However, an examination of the source used by Harris to gain his information calls his claims into doubt, as it is stated there that the vessel from Melville Island did not visit Dili, but rather the Dutch settlement at Kupang. The story of the French vessel at Dili is thus third-hand at best. Meanwhile, the English vessel had not even been to Timor but was reported to have visited Flores, where it flew the Dutch flag to intimidate the local headman to deliver a cargo of slaves, and not as a disguise because of its 'disreputable business' (G. Miller 1923:682–683). If any slaves were shipped from Dili in 1826, they were probably Timorese captured during internecine warfare and sold by their enemies. They were almost certainly not the victims of Portuguese slave-raiding, which was a relatively rare phenomena, mainly practised contrary to official guidelines, and had largely ceased to exist by the mid seventeenth century.

#### 4 Were the Tiwi Routinely Hostile to Outsiders?

In his account of the first documented encounter of the Tiwi with Europeans in 1705, James Cameron says that the islanders yelled and made signs and gestures for the Dutch sailors who landed on Melville Island to leave and, when this did not work, threw spears at them. The single musket that was fired at them in return resulted in one Tiwi man being hit and the rest running away. Cameron (1998:32) then states:

But the Tiwi had their revenge and speared two sailors in a surprise attack [...] The clear message was that the Tiwi would resist unwanted intrusions.

In this way, Cameron distorts the story by highlighting the two cases of violence experienced during the Dutch visit and ignoring the months of amicable intercourse that existed in between. Derek Pugh (2017:81) says that by 1824, the Tiwi had developed a reputation as 'an unwelcoming and fearsome tribe who were willing to repel all visitors', but he queries why this should have been so, because the 1705 Dutch visit had taken place largely in an atmosphere of peace



and amity. Hart and Pilling (1960:97–98) make the same observation, and it is for this reason that they suggest Portuguese slave-raiding must have occurred after the Dutch visit but ended before the arrival of the British.

In his account of the 1705 Dutch visit, Venbrux (2003:170–176) relates that the Tiwi used clubs and throwing sticks, not spears, during the first encounter with the Dutch and the fighting ceased as soon as one person was injured. He argues that the Tiwi did not intend to harm the visitors and relates that the skirmish was part of a ceremonial procedure to remove taboos allowing the Tiwi to interact with the intruders. Venbrux notes that the man shot during the encounter was ‘bandaged and assisted’ by the sailors, but he removed the bandages and threw them away. Nevertheless, friendly relations were soon established, and the Dutch and Tiwi spent much time together on the shore. In addition, the Tiwi were invited aboard the Dutch ships, an experience they seemed to enjoy. The Tiwi were given knives, beads, and other goods, and in turn they gave the Dutch fish and crabs and possibly traded traditional artefacts. When the Dutch were preparing to leave, eight Tiwi men attempted to remove the clothing of two sailors who were wounded in the attack (spearing was not mentioned). Due to this, the Dutch considered the Tiwi to have been ungrateful for the ‘kindness and offerings’ they had been given. Despite the months of peaceful interaction, the Dutch now considered the Tiwi ‘foul and full of treachery’ and in possession of a ‘malignant nature’.<sup>18</sup> Venbrux, however, notes that later reports show that ‘first contact’ Aborigines often wanted Europeans (especially beardless young men) to disrobe so they could learn their sexual identity. Thus, the naked Tiwi may simply have been curious to know the sex of their clothed visitors and meant no harm. Peter Forrest (1995:17) takes a different view, suggesting that once the Tiwi were aware that the Dutch were leaving, they resolved to get as many goods from them as possible, believing they were entitled to them in return for their hospitality.

Writing about his 1818 visit to Melville Island, King (1969 [1827]:14) says that the behaviour of the Tiwi during his attempted negotiation for the return of a theodolite stand, left him and his men ‘thoroughly disgusted’. The Tiwi, he says, also inspired ‘a level of distrust that could not be conquered’. However, botanist Allan Cunningham, who was with King when the theodolite stand was left behind on Luxmore Head, tells quite a different story about what happened that day. According to Cunningham (cited in Powell 2016:32), he was also left behind when the others made their ‘disorderly’ departure upon the arrival of some Tiwi men. In their haste, Cunningham’s colleagues also left behind a

18 For the Dutch original and English translation of the 1705 report, see Robert 1973:139–45.

folder of sketches of the coastline. Cunningham says the Tiwi men were just about to seize the sketches when he grabbed them, offering his insect net as compensation, which the men accepted. Completely unmolested, and feeling no need to rush, Cunningham then 'retired to the boat in an orderly way'. Alan Powell (2016:32–33) argues that Cunningham's story shows that it was curiosity, not hostility, that encouraged the Tiwi to approach King and his men. He makes the further point that the Tiwi may have retained the theodolite stand as a sort of 'rent' imposed on King for intruding on their land without permission.

Tiwi hostility to the Macassans may also have been exaggerated, although Macassan–Aboriginal relations on the north Australian coast were certainly not always harmonious. When Matthew Flinders (1814:231–232) made the first British contact with Macassans in 1803, the Macassan Pobassoo cautioned Flinders 'to beware of the natives', as he had previously been speared and one man had been slightly wounded during their current visit. In 1828, Captain Smyth (1923:790) of Fort Wellington reported being informed by the Macassan Daeng Riolo that the 'natives' of the Arnhem Land coast were 'very troublesome and not to be trusted'. Alfred Searcy (1984 [1909]:45–47, 139), sub-collector of customs at Port Darwin for 14 years from 1882, recounts many cases of conflict between Macassans and Aborigines in Arnhem Land in his book *In Australian tropics*, but he stresses the hostility of the Tiwi to all outsiders. On one occasion, Searcy was aboard a steamer whose engines failed near Melville Island during a gale. Searcy, contemplating shipwreck, worried about what would happen to anybody who made it ashore, as the islanders were, he says, 'fierce and treacherous'. He notes that remains of fireplaces and smokehouses prove that Macassans had once worked on the island, but they generally avoided it.<sup>19</sup> Searcy gives details of islanders attacking the crew of two Macassan boats that had been wrecked on Melville Island during his period of service. On both occasions the Tiwi were held at bay with firearms and the crews finally escaped in canoes. Nevertheless, a few men were killed and some wounded. Although Searcy only gives these examples, he clearly believed it a common occurrence as shown by his statement: 'No doubt many proas have been wrecked there [Melville Island] and the crews massacred by the wild inhabitants.'

Despite Searcy's assertions, Tiwi oral tradition suggests Macassans may have visited Melville Island more frequently than usually supposed and, while viol-

19 Fireplaces and remnants of smokehouses were also sighted on Melville Island by E.O. Robinson in 1896; see 'Romantic northern Australia', *South Australian Register*, 27-5-1897.

ence did occur, so too did cooperation and tolerance. In 1989, Peter Spillett (1989:1–6) made a trip to Melville Island to research Macassan–Tiwi connections. At Cape Lavery he was shown a well, known to the locals as the Macassan Well, as they said the site was originally a Macassan camp. Spillett heard of other Macassan camps and wells in various locations. Morris (2001:62–65), meanwhile, recorded stories about Macassans from ‘elderly Tiwi men’ in the early 1960s. Through these stories at least seven Macassan campsites were identified. Some of Morris’s informants asserted that friendly Macassan–Tiwi contact did occur, with some Macassans remaining on the island for long periods and fathering children with Tiwi women. The Macassans also bartered some of their goods for food, introducing the Tiwi to items such as rice and tobacco. One of Morris’s stories, also collected in part by Spillett, concerns a group of Macassans landing on Melville Island who approached some Tiwi people yelling ‘Pongki! Pongki!’, which means ‘peace’ in the Tiwi language, thus indicating earlier Macassan visits. The Tiwi agreed to help the Macassans in their search for trepang and received food and other goods in return. When the Macassans left, it is believed they took a Tiwi girl with them back to Makassar. The son she had with a Macassan man later travelled to the Cobourg Peninsula with the trepangers and settled there with a local Aboriginal woman. Other stories tell of Macassan shipwreck survivors and other castaways on Melville Island whose presence was accepted without any antagonism. How are we to reconcile these stories with reports of merciless attacks on Macassan intruders? The answer would be the same way we deal with reports of periodic friendly cooperation with Macassans and violent opposition to their presence in parts of Arnhem Land. The causes of these changes in attitude are rarely known, but one can imagine it might have been due to the bad behaviour of individual Macassans leading to the punishment of later visitors. After a time, relations improved once again.

In all the cases described so far, the intruders were transient visitors. The first group to attempt permanent settlement faced continued hostility from the Tiwi. On 26 September 1824, a group of British sailors, marines, and convicts landed on Melville Island, where a proclamation was read claiming possession of the surrounding country for the British crown. In the following weeks, a small settlement and garrison were established at Fort Dundas on the shore of Apsley Strait. Although the smoke from several fires could be seen, and there were other signs that people had recently been in the vicinity, no Tiwi were encountered until 25 October, when the commandant of the settlement, Captain J.J. Gordon Bremer, and his boat crew met a group of ten Tiwi men on the opposite side of the strait. The Tiwi made ‘vehement gestures’ and harangued the boat party yet accepted a handkerchief and some other ‘trifles’ passed to

them on the end of an oar. Bremer was pleased to have made contact, but on arriving at the settlement he learnt that a group of Tiwi men had surrounded two men and stolen their axes. Bremer approached this group of 18 to 20 men and offered more 'trifles', which the Tiwi accepted but soon threw away. They made it clear that they wanted axes. Bremer gave them three more and the Tiwi then withdrew. Two days later, they took an axe and a sickle from another working party and then turned up at the fort demanding more. Bremer refused and the Tiwi were driven away (Cameron 1998:33–39; Powell 2016:55, 63).

On 30 October 1824, three separate groups of Tiwi, numbering up to 100 men, attacked some marines cutting grass and a group of sailors filling water casks. The grass cutters let off several shots in response to the volley of spears thrown at them and the Tiwi men retreated. At the watering point, one of the sailors received a slight spear wound, but a corporal of the marines who was present shot one of the Tiwi attackers at close range and killed him. Little was seen of the Tiwi following this incident, although they continued to steal axes from men working outside the fortress. On 11 June 1825, however, Corporal Samuel Gwyliam was speared to death. Cameron argues this was no random attack as it was Gwyliam who had shot dead the Tiwi warrior in October the previous year (Cameron 1998:40–41; Powell 2016:63–64, 70, 222).<sup>20</sup>

A major hindrance to peaceful relations with the Tiwi was the lack of a mutually understood language. In mid or late 1825, a boy or young man with Malay features was captured by some men from the fortress. Bremer's successor, Captain Maurice Barlow, decided to detain him, presumably to teach him English and then act as go-between with the Tiwi. However, he escaped after just a few days (Morris 2001:47–48; Powell 2016:70). While Barlow may have had good intentions, the capture of this young man is likely to have antagonized the Tiwi, as this was probably the same person who had been sighted earlier and described by one of Bremer's officers as a favourite of the 'natives' (Pugh 2017:88). On 26 October 1826, convict Julius Campbell died with three spears in his back after he and another convict encountered a group of Tiwi warriors, and in late 1827, there were six cases of unsuccessful spearings. The Tiwi caused other difficulties for the British by burning hay; destroying small buildings; spearing pigs and sheep; driving away cattle; and stealing linen and clothing. On 2 November 1827, Dr John Gold and John Henry Green ignored warnings

20 Powell notes there are two accounts of the Tiwi man who was shot. In one version he was killed and in the other he was wounded. Considering later events, it appears likely he was killed.

to refrain from walking in the bush and found themselves attacked by a group of Tiwi. Green died with 17 spear wounds and Gold with 31. The killings seem to have been the direct result of the earlier capture and imprisonment at the fortress of the Tiwi leader, Tampu, who was caught by soldiers when his group attacked a working party. That the men's deaths were a reprisal for Tampu's imprisonment is indicated by the multiple wounds inflicted, which was typical of Tiwi payback killings. A special barbed spear used in such killings was still in Gold's body when it was found (Fredericksen 2002:298; Morris 2001:50–51; Powell 2016:71, 89–92).

In May 1828, orders were issued for Fort Dundas to be abandoned, but it was not until early 1829 that this occurred. There were many reasons for this happening, but, as Morris shows in his survey of the literature, many authors have overstated the role played by Tiwi violence. Some have also embellished the extent of the hostilities, making false claims of the Tiwi laying siege to the fort and massacring soldiers. Rather than the organized warfare claimed by some authors, Morris asserts that 'Tiwi aggression took the form of thefts, sneak attacks and at least two retaliatory killings, those of Green and Gold' (Morris 2001:45–46, 48, 53–54). The islanders wanted metal tools and may have considered that the British, as interlopers, had an obligation to share. When this did not occur, they were prepared to use violence to get them. It is possible that the Tiwi saw the seizure of axes and other tools as compensation for the alienation of their traditional land. Their hostility to the British may also have stemmed from their realization that the intruders were not planning to leave and were now a source of competition for the islands' food, wood, and water (Cameron 1998:41–46; Morris 2001:40). Another possibility is that Tiwi demands for axes were related to a tradition of axe-giving as a ritual contractual obligation. The Tiwi men who met King (1969 [1827]:111) in 1818 had also demanded axes, but they may have received less than they considered just, resulting in their failure to return King's theodolite stand. In modern practice, axes are given to people who perform certain acts in Tiwi post-funeral rituals (Venbrux 1995:184, 197–200). Perhaps the Tiwi conceived the British at Fort Dundas as subject to similar contractual obligations and felt justified in taking their axes. All of this is conjecture, however, and it is unknown what the Tiwi thought about these matters. The Tiwi were certainly not always hostile. During the earliest days of the settlement, there were several peaceful encounters, with Tiwi men and British soldiers spending considerable time together, even walking hand in hand. A friendly exchange also took place on Bathurst Island, with soldiers exchanging some of their headwear for Tiwi wooden clubs (Pugh 2017:85–87). During Major Campbell's period on Melville Island (1826–1828), some of the Fort Dundas occupants were killed by the Tiwi and several others were wounded. The

Tiwi were shot at on several occasions, but Campbell (1834:154) was unsure if any had died as a result. However, Campbell recognized that if any had died, it could have sparked a 'spirit of revenge' leading to further violence. Nevertheless, Campbell noted a 'curious inconsistency' in Tiwi behaviour, insofar as one day they would appear 'good-humoured and friendly', while the next day they would be throwing spears. Campbell's comments reveal that the Tiwi were not routinely hostile to the British but could be on occasion, although the reasons for this were unknown to Campbell.

Meanwhile, there are some scenarios other than Portuguese slave-raiding that could have led to the Tiwi being cautious with strangers, such as the experience of earlier visits to the Tiwi Islands by non-Europeans. For example, Morris (2001:29–30) shows that since the early twentieth century anthropologists and others have concluded that Tiwi rituals and material culture are sufficiently different from the mainland to suggest influence by outside forces. Burial posts, ritual ornaments, and body-scarring are among the items proposed to result from contact between New Guinea, Timor, and the Tiwi Islands. Such contact may have occurred during the last Ice Age when New Guinea and the Tiwi Islands (but not Timor) were joined to the Australian mainland. It could also be the result of direct sea contact or contact via the Macassans. The consensus is that such culture transfer occurred centuries before the arrival of Europeans. Macknight (1976:97) concludes that the Macassans began regularly visiting north Australia in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, although far earlier visits could have occurred. Commenting on the diversity of Macassan crews, Earl (1846:240) notes that

when the prahūs congregate at Port Essington, the population of the settlement became of a very motley character [...] with natives of Celebes [Sulawesi] and Sumbawa, Badjūs [Bajau] of the coast of Borneo, Timorians, and Javanese, with an occasional sprinkling of New Guinea negroes.

It is known that Bajau people occasionally visited north Australia in their own vessels, and it is possible that any of the others could have visited the Tiwi Islands at some time as well. There has also been speculation of a Chinese discovery of Australia during the period of Ming-dynasty exploration in the early fifteenth century. Chinese traders had already made it to Timor by that time. One item presented as evidence for a Chinese discovery is a 'Ming' 'jade' figurine found in Palmerston in 1879. The item has since been judged to be common soapstone of far more recent manufacture. Meanwhile, old fragments of Chinese pottery found on the Arnhem Land coast are deemed likely to be refuse left behind by visiting Macassans. Moreover, none have been found in the

Tiwi Islands (Mulvaney 1969:30–32; Rolls 1992:6–10).<sup>21</sup> It has also been suggested that Arab traders, believed to have reached the Tanimbar and Aru Islands before the seventeenth century, may also have visited north Australia, but there is no evidence for this (Mulvaney 1969:34; Powell 1982:23). In all this conjecture there is no suggestion that conflict in the Tiwi Islands was the result, although it may have occurred.

Another possibility is that the Portuguese really did visit the Tiwi Islands and kidnapped one or more of the islanders to learn more of their language and culture, as Barlow did in 1825. This was a common practice with European explorers and settlers of the era, but it is noteworthy that the 1705 Dutch expedition that visited Melville Island had instructions forbidding such action. When one of Van Delft's officers suggested taking some islanders back to Batavia, he would not allow it (Venbrux 2003:172–173). John Campbell (1834:155) favours the idea that the slavers that he believed visited Melville Island came from Portuguese Timor, but he implies that they could also have been 'Malays'. W.Ph. Coolhaas (1960:480) refers to a 1654 Dutch letter that states that the Makassarese sailed annually to some large islands south of Damar to collect 'slaves, wax, tortoise-shell, etc.' On several grounds, Macknight (1976:94) rejects Coolhaas's suggestion that the reference is to north Australia. Nevertheless, the possibility does exist of Asian or Papuan slave-raiders having visited the islands. Papuan slave-raiders operated in eastern Indonesia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Bosma 2020:111; Hägerdal 2020b:558). In 1791, a group of convicts from Sydney made a daring escape in a small boat, finally arriving in Kupang on Timor. While travelling through the Gulf of Carpentaria they were twice chased by canoes carrying between 30 to 40 men who shot at them with bows and arrows. From the description, these men were either Torres Strait Islanders or Papuans. They may have only wanted to chase the white people away, but they could also have wanted to capture them (Martin 2017:109–117). In both cases, these people were operating in an area relatively close to the Tiwi Islands, so they could have conceivably travelled there also. In the late eighteenth century, slave-raiders from islands near Ambon attacked fishing boats and villages on several small islands near Timor, plundering goods and capturing people to sell as slaves (Hägerdal 2020a:15–16). And in 1839, Earl (2002 [1846]:58) learnt that three homeward-bound Macassan boats were attacked

21 Tiwi oral tradition records peaceful visits to the Tiwi Islands by Palmerston-based Chinese trepangers in the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries (Morris 2001:72–3). Dutch records from Timor mention a Chinese trader, who was blown off course in 1751, landing on a large island where he spent two days with a friendly people whose description suggests they may have been Tiwi (Macknight 1976:95; Morris 2001:34).

near Flores by pirates from the Philippines and ‘the crews carried as slaves to Mindanao’. Meanwhile, Daeng Riolo said in 1828 that his instructions prohibited him from visiting Melville Island because it was ‘infested with pirates’ from the Ambon region (Smyth 1923:790). Campbell (1923:713) says these instructions came from the Dutch, but it is unknown where they got their information. While the intelligence proved to be incorrect, it shows that people in Makassar thought it perfectly feasible that pirates from Maluku could be operating off the north Australian coast.

All the preceding is conjecture, but it seems that, following the departure of the British in 1829, the Tiwi received no further visitors, with the probable exception of Macassans, until the establishment of Palmerston in 1869. Early visitors to Melville Island from Palmerston noted large numbers of buffaloes, descendants of those left behind in 1829, but the Tiwi were not seen. In 1873, Government Resident Bloomfield Douglas took a party to Melville Island to shoot buffaloes, but when they returned to their boat, they found it had been damaged and they were attacked by a group of Tiwi throwing stones and spears. The visitors responded with gunfire. Douglas then cautioned future visitors of ‘the danger from the natives’.<sup>22</sup> Shooting parties to the island persisted, however, with the Tiwi usually choosing to avoid the visitors. In 1886, the Tiwi became more demonstrative, destroying beacons built by a survey party and ‘becoming very insolent and brandishing spears’, but they did not resort to acts of physical violence.<sup>23</sup> The following year, an official party visited Melville Island for general investigation, travelling from one side to the other. Groups of Tiwi followed them throughout their journey, occasionally yelling at the intruders and twice showering them with spears, wounding the arm of the party leader but causing no other injury. The Europeans fired volleys at the Tiwi, but it is unknown if any were hit.<sup>24</sup> In the official report of the expedition<sup>25</sup> it was stated:

It appears quite clear that the natives regard the landing of white men on the island as an invasion, and they determine to murder all who venture on what they consider to be their territory. All future visitors to Melville Island must keep this in mind.

22 ‘Northern Territory’, *Express and Telegraph*, 18-3-1873.

23 ‘The Northern Territory’, *Evening Journal*, 6-11-1886.

24 ‘Return of the Melville Island party. Spearing of the leader’, *North Australian*, 15-10-1887.

25 ‘Official report of the exploration trip to Melville Island’, *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 29-10-1887.



The behaviour of the Tiwi on this occasion seemed to confirm their bad reputation in the minds of many Europeans, but given the behaviour of some of the white settlers of Palmerston, it is no wonder that the Tiwi were hostile towards intruders. For example, in January 1890, a party of ten European men, accompanied by two Aborigines from the local Larrakia people, made a boat trip to Melville Island for the purpose of exploration and buffalo shooting. Upon making the shore, some of the well-armed adventurers spotted a few dogs belonging to the Tiwi ambling towards them and decided to shoot them, but without actually hitting any. A group of Tiwi was then spotted nearby. They appeared unarmed, but when they let out a loud cry, the Europeans panicked and ran back to their dinghy, although a few let off some ineffective shots at the Tiwi before beginning their retreat. Back on their boat, some of the braver white men suggested re-landing on the island, but they were outvoted. Meanwhile, a group of Tiwi was sighted on the beach, picking up empty cartridge cases and examining the tracks of their uninvited guests. Some of the would-be explorers started firing at the Tiwi again but failed once more to hit their target. The whole sorry story was recounted in the local newspapers, with one reporter castigating the party members for their actions, and noting that

[t]he result of the visit of this party to Melville Island, will probably be that the natives will feel the greatest contempt for all white men, and the next party who visit there will have to be prepared for a warm and determined reception.<sup>26</sup>

This expedition to Melville Island included some well-known businessmen from Palmerston and was publicly reported both before and after the event. Unreported visits were probably also made to Melville Island, perhaps by some lesser-known members of the community; one can only speculate what type of activities they may have indulged in.

The days of the Tiwi islanders' seclusion were fast coming to an end. In September 1892, Edward Oswin Robinson bought the lease to Melville Island from the South Australian government.<sup>27</sup> Robinson had been a member of various expeditions to the island, and he made several further visits to assess the potential for buffalo hunting. In 1894, he was reported as saying that he had expected trouble from the Tiwi, but he found that they were not 'so wild as had

26 'Trip to Melville Island', *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 31-1-1890.

27 'Siftings, local and otherwise', *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 2-9-1892.

been supposed'.<sup>28</sup> Hunting began in earnest the following year, but the main work was done by Joe Cooper, Barney Flynn, and a team of Iwaidja Aboriginal helpers from Cobourg Peninsula, where Robinson also hunted buffaloes. Despite Robinson's 1894 appraisal, there were still problems, with allegations of the Iwaidja men shooting at the Tiwi and abducting women to take as brides. The Tiwi responded with violence. Cooper was speared, but he soon recovered and started hunting again. Gradually, some Tiwi were enticed to work with Cooper and his men, but they withdrew from the island in late 1896. In 1905, Cooper returned and set up a permanent camp where he was to remain until 1916. Meanwhile, Father Francis Xavier Gsell established a Catholic mission on Bathurst Island in 1911, coinciding with the transfer of political control of the Northern Territory from South Australia to the Commonwealth of Australia, which resulted in increased government interest in the islands. With these changes, the Tiwi gradually came to tolerate the permanent presence of Europeans and other foreigners in their territory.<sup>29</sup>

In an article published in 1930, the anthropologist C.W.M. Hart (1930:168) says the Tiwi had by then been 'tamed' by their contact with white men. However, the following quote shows he was not sure they ever deserved their earlier reputation:

The ferocity of these people, I am convinced, has been much exaggerated even by the earliest settlers. As a matter of fact their outstanding characteristic is not their fierceness but their sense of humour [...] They are constantly laughing, even at the most solemn moments, and this applies to practically every man, woman and child on the island.

To summarize this section, it can be said that stories of Tiwi hostility to outsiders have often been exaggerated. The Dutch established good relations with the Tiwi in 1705, and the Macassans seem to have often worked with the Tiwi, or at least operated on their shores without difficulty. Violence did occur, but that was true for the whole Arnhem Land coast as well. Other people may have visited the Tiwi Islands whose behaviour made the Tiwi wary of intruders, but this is conjecture. The Tiwi were often hostile to the occupants of Fort Dundas, although not in a routine fashion. This suggests a lot of misunderstandings occurred at the time. More visitors came to Melville Island after the establishment of Palmerston in 1869 and were sometimes given a hostile reception, but

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28 'Buffaloes and blackfellows. Interview with Mr. E.O. Robinson', *Advertiser*, 30-6-1894.  
29 Briggs 2008; Hempell 2008; Macknight 2008; Morris 2000.

in many cases the Tiwi preferred to avoid their visitors. On at least one occasion, the gratuitous violence of the European visitors gave the Tiwi every excuse to be distrustful. Indeed, the Tiwi had many reasons for their sometimes hostile attitude to intruders without the need for the purported experience of Portuguese slave-raiding.

## 5 Conclusions

Speculation about slave-raiding of the Tiwi Islands by the Portuguese resident in Timor has existed for over 180 years. The idea first appeared in print in an article by John Campbell published in 1834, but the most influential claims about this matter were made by George Windsor Earl in a book published in 1853. Most subsequent authors who have presented the slave-raiding claims either cite Earl or other works that cite him. Several authors claim or imply that this slave-raiding occurred before 1606, the otherwise generally accepted date for the European discovery of Australia by Dutch mariners. By supporting the notion of Portuguese slave-raiding at such an early date, these authors challenge the orthodox view but rarely acknowledge this. Meanwhile, there have been supporters of a Portuguese priority theory since the eighteenth century, but the arguments and 'evidence' put forward by these authors have failed to gain acceptance with most academic historians.

No solid evidence has ever been presented to prove the Portuguese slave-raiding claims. Several researchers aver or imply that the Tiwi have no oral tradition of Portuguese slave-raiding. However, Genevieve Campbell was told stories about Tiwi people being 'taken' to work on 'Portuguese' ships. Although intriguing, these stories are ambiguous and do not represent a coherent oral tradition of Portuguese slave-raiding. Slave-raiding was not the usual means by which the Portuguese acquired slaves. Rather, they were usually purchased, either for domestic use or for export to other markets. On Timor, the Portuguese had a steady supply of slaves due to the endemic warfare of the local petty princedoms. Meanwhile, the experience of Portuguese slave-raiding is presented by several authors as the reason for the Tiwi people's routinely hostile reaction to intruders. However, many of these claims have been highly exaggerated. The Tiwi were violent towards intruders on many occasions, and while the cause is not always known, there are multiple reasons why this might have occurred, as it did in many parts of nearby Arnhem Land. Nobody claims that the Arnhem Landers' occasionally hostile reaction to outsiders was due to a memory of slave-raiders, and there is no justification to apply this reason to the Tiwi Islanders either. Until any solid evidence emerges to support the idea that

the Portuguese from Timor conducted slave raids on Melville Island, authors would be best advised to disown this notion or, if it must be mentioned, make it clear it is wholly unsubstantiated.

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